

OBJECT CONSTANCY IN THE LIGHT OF PIAGET'S VERTICAL DÉCALAGE*

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Among psychoanalysts there is a compelling attraction to Piaget's developmental theories. There is by now an abundant literature on the relationship between the psychoanalytic concept of libidinal object constancy and Piaget's concept of object permanence. But in this literature the tentative and speculative origin of the term "object constancy" within psychoanalysis is often forgotten. Consequently, although there is much discussion about its meaning, object constancy has been reified as a "thing" to be acquired at a certain time in the life cycle, or as a stage occurring at a particular point in development.

In 1952 Hartmann introduced object constancy into the psychoanalytic literature by speaking of "that form of satisfactory object relations that includes object constancy."¹ In his 1953 paper on the metapsychology of schizophrenia, object constancy became the label of a stage of development. "I described two stages of object relations as the relation to the need-satisfying object and the achievement of object constancy."² While most writers accept Hartmann's general formulation that object constancy represents a transition in level of object relations coming after the phase of need-satisfaction, interpretations of his formulation differ considerably. And there have been even more differences about the timing of the attainment of the stage of object constancy. The studies of Gouin Décarie³ and Fraiberg⁴ represent recent attempts to adjust the timing of the attainment of object constancy to the timing of the attainment of object permanence, which according to Piaget's conceptualization takes place at about 18 months. In their reviews of the numerous psychoanalytic time-tables for object constancy, the range reported was between five months to about 36 months.

As to interpretation of the concept of object constancy, Anna Freud, in a panel discussion at the 1967 Psychoanalytical Congress,⁵ offered

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